

DEPARTMENTS OF COMMERCE, JUSTICE, AND STATE, THE JUDICIARY, AND RELATED
AGENCIES
APPROPRIATIONS FOR 1999

IMMIGRATION AND NATURALIZATION SERVICE

WITNESS

DORIS MEISSNER, COMMISSIONER

Thank you, Mr. Chairman and Members of this Subcommittee for the opportunity to discuss the President's fiscal year 1999 budget request for the Immigration and Naturalization Service.

Let me start by thanking you for the support that you have given us over the last several years. The new resources that you have just detailed are producing significant and concrete results at a time in which the immigration challenges facing the Federal Government have never been greater.

Social, political, and economic changes in the last several years have put tremendous enforcement pressures on our borders and created record level demands for immigration services.

Nonetheless, we have made important differences in communities around the country like in Brownsville, Texas where Operation Rio Grande is credited with helping to restore order and commerce in the downtown area.

In Storm Lake, Iowa where our efforts to identify illegal workers in meat packing plants have helped return \$11 an hour jobs to American workers.

In New York City where we worked with Federal and Local law enforcement officials to obtain nearly 20 felony smuggling convictions in the exploitation of dozens of hearing and speech impaired Mexicans who were being held in virtual slavery.

These accomplishments are not an accident. Last fiscal year we set many tough performance goals and we have met them. We set a goal of continuing to deter border crossers in San Diego. Apprehensions there last year reached a 17- year low.

We set a goal of removing 93,000 illegal aliens with criminal records or without standing removal orders. We topped our goal by 20,000; having removed 113,000 criminals or removable aliens.

We set a goal of hiring and training more than 5,000 people and we did. We set a goal of focusing our work site enforcement efforts on bigger cases and those with criminal violations.

We exceeded those goals in completion of criminal cases by 29-percent and administrative cases by 25-percent. We set a goal to reduce the back-log of asylum cases and to keep current on new case receipts.

Last year, we processed nearly 140,000 asylum cases, which is a 160-percent increase over 1994. We significantly cut our case backlog for the first time in three years. So, the year was a productive one, not just from the standpoint of how we met specific performance goals, but for a number of other reasons as well.

We made a key internal change by bringing in an entirely new team of senior managers to head the Agency; a new Deputy Commissioner, a new Executive Associate Commissioner for Field Operations, three new Regional Directors, and a new Chief of the Border Patrol.

We began enforcing a complex sweeping new law that gives significant new authority to the INS. In implementing the Illegal Reform and Immigrant Responsibility Act, we have retrained half of our staff, writing and implementing more than 60 regulations and creating 70 new forms.

We also began putting into place a new infrastructure for the Naturalization Program. When I appeared before you last April, the Naturalization Program was in critical condition.

The number of citizenship applications had tripled. Our system was simply not equipped to handle the crush. No one voiced greater concern about the lapses in reliability and credibility than did you, Mr. Chairman.

In response, we established organization within INS Headquarters to focus solely on naturalization. By streamlining the chain of command, we have restored accountability and made significant progress toward building a Citizenship Program that is both customer oriented and secure.

We instituted stringent new quality assurance procedures, including requiring verified FBI fingerprint checks for every naturalization applicant. A December audit by KPMG Pete Marwick has validated that these new procedures are working and that this is a system in which Congress and the public can have confidence.

A year ago, more than half of the citizenship fingerprint cards prepared by outside providers were being rejected by the FBI as unreadable. That created unnecessary delays for applicants and raised concerns about the integrity of the process.

Since the termination of the Designated Fingerprint Services Program four months ago, at your direction, we have completely revamped the fingerprinting process, bringing it in-house by creating 120 of our own centers and adding new technology to prevent data entry mistakes and reduce delays.

The result, today, the fingerprint rejection rate is under 2-percent. A year ago, the majority of citizenship applications were being mailed to our over-burdened district offices for pre-processing; a system which contributed to delays and inefficiency.

By mid-April, all naturalization applications will be mailed directly to our four highly automated service centers, freeing up personnel in our districts to focus on adjudicating the applications.

Once INS did lack the resources it needed to do our job. Now, we are proving that when we are given the resources, we can do the job. We are not all that we can be. We are not all that we are going to be, but we certainly are not what we once were.

We clearly recognize that we can do better and that we must. Sticking with the status quo is simply not an option. Mr. Chairman, you have expressed your frustration that the INS does not seem to be changing fast enough.

As the person in charge of leading this fast growing Agency, I can honestly tell you that I share that frustration. You asked the Attorney General and me to look at the proposal that the Commission on Immigration Reform put forward to improve the management of the Federal Immigration System and to report back to you with our recommendations.

The Attorney General and I have treated your request as a real opportunity for INS. The Administration has seized upon it as well. In recent months, several organizations and individuals have also put forward proposals for restructuring INS.

At the President's direction, the White House Domestic Policy Council reviewed the Commission's proposal and others, working with OMB, consulting with various Executive Branch agencies, and immigration experts outside the Government to evaluate reform ideas.

What is most striking about the various reform proposals are not the differences, but the similarities. When you get down to it, we all share a similar goal, which is a more efficient, effective immigration system. Based on its review, the Administration determined that the Commission and others had correctly diagnosed many of INS' long-standing problems.

With that in mind, we are seeking to improve accountability, consistency, and professionalism by fundamentally restructuring the INS. Working with the Department of Justice, INS hired a leading management consulting firm to provide an independent assessment and to help INS design a better structure.

Our proposal untangles INS' overlapping and frequently confusing structure and replaces it with two clear chains of command. One chain would accomplish our enforcement mission. The other would provide services to legal immigrants and their families.

The proposal calls for changing the existing field structure of regions and districts and creating new jurisdictions tailored to meet local service and enforcement needs.

Finally, it establishes a shared support operation to serve as the administrative and technological backbone upon which the enforcement and service operations depend.

On the enforcement side, our new frame work would lead to improved results by ensuring that priorities are shared and that day-to-day operations are closely coordinated among each enforcement discipline.

We would achieve this by establishing new jurisdictions around the country called enforcement areas. The enforcement areas would oversee all enforcement related functions in their geographical area, including the Border Patrol, investigations, inspections, detention, and deportation.

On the service side, our goal is to create an organization geared toward providing consistent and high quality service at every INS Office nationwide. There should be no advantage or disadvantage for individual applicants dealing with this agency based on where they live.

We plan to establish neighborhood-based customer services offices across the country, providing an array of services from fingerprinting to interviewing.

These offices would be staffed by service oriented professionals and their Directors would be held accountable for meeting nationally established standards for timely processing and courteous service.

By retaining both of these functions within a single agency, the Reform Plan would ensure that both enforcement and service operations are appropriately coordinated and supported by Headquarters.

To ensure the necessary coordination and integration, and to promote efficiency, we would establish a shared support operation that would serve as the administrative and technological backbone for both the enforcement and service chains of command of the agency.

The new structural frame work also offers benefits to INS staff. For the first time, clear career paths would be established for enforcement and service personnel, allowing the Agency to attract, promote, and retain the best qualified employees.

As for the cost of this proposal, we believe it would be minimal. For example, since we are responding to heightened demands in enforcement and service already, we have requested substantial resources in fiscal year 1999 for office space, construction of additional facilities, as well as new staff.

The cost of the restructuring proposal could be absorbed within this and future growth. Those resources would provide the necessary foundation for implementing the structure we are proposing.

We believe that we are giving you a cost-effective common sense approach that will maximize the return on investment that the Congress and the public have made in this Agency. For fiscal year 1999, we are seeking a total of \$4.2 billion and 31,499 positions.

This number represents a \$390 million increase in funding over this year's spending level and adds more than 2,600 positions. The details of that request are in the long statement which is submitted for the record.

With this money, we will continue to produce results and build on the progress that we have made in the last several years. We will do what you and what the American people expect of us, uphold our Nation's tradition as a Nation of immigrants and a Nation of laws.

Thank you very much.